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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/12/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: VISITING PRIEST DETAINED BY SAG IN DAMMAM,
RELEASED TWO DAYS LATER

Classified by Consul General Dave Speidel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) According to two sources in the Eastern Province's (EP's) expatriate Indian Roman Catholic community, a Catholic priest was detained by the SAG on April 5 while presiding over an evening service at a large compound or farm in Dammam. The priest, an Indian national from Kerala who was visiting Saudi Arabia with the permission of the bishop in Abu Dhabi to conduct services in the period leading up to Easter, was released on April 7 and left the country April 8.

While neither source was present at the service in question, both had heard about the event before discussing it with PolOff on April 10 and 12 respectively. One had talked to an EP-based Catholic priest about it, and the other had talked with several people who were there.

¶2. (C) One source described the location of the service as a "large compound with five large reception halls in Sector 91 of Dammam," and the other source said it was "a farm near the border of Dammam and Seiha." (Note: Seiha is the first town of the Qatif oasis and borders Dammam to the north. These descriptions are not necessarily contradictory, as large compounds with green areas and palm trees are called farms. End note.) Both sources noted that the attendance at the evening service was likely quite large, with one estimating several hundred attendees, primarily from the Keralan expatriate community. Their attention drawn to the compound either by the large number of cars parked in and around it or for another reason, several members of the Mutawaa'in, or religious police, entered the compound and detained the priest, the sources said.

¶3. (C) Note: One source cautioned without prompting that the service at which the priest was detained was "not a small, private gathering," and that the priest and attendees were running a risk because of its size. The other source mentioned that this incident was the first of its kind in several years, to the best of his knowledge. Interestingly, contacts in the EP Filipino Christian expatriate community had not heard about the incident as of April 9, a testament to the expatriate community's separation by nationality and Christians' reluctance to talk about their religious practices. End note.

(APPROVED: SPEIDEL)
OBERWETTER